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The Formation of Socialist Elites in the GDR: Continuities with National Socialist Germany

Heinrich Best*

Abstract: »Sozialistische Elitenbildung in der DDR: Kontinuitätsstränge zum nationalsozialistischen Deutschland«. The legitimacy of the rule of a socialist elite was essentially based on meeting the criteria of its own ideology, thus it is appropriate to define the congruity of the criteria of the system of conviction and the practice of its realization. Concerning power elites of the GDR this can particularly be done while looking at their involvement in the system of rule of National Socialism. Here, it is about the legitimacy core of the SED's power structure, as from its beginnings to its end anti-fascism was the most important ideologem of its ideology of power. There is ample empirical evidence that, in the respective birth cohorts, there was a considerable share of former NSDAP members among the First and Second Secretaries of the SED County Committees in the districts of Erfurt, Gera, and Suhl. The fact that their past during the NS regime was overwhelmingly characterized by collaboration and fellow travelling may be supposed to have even supported a kind of submissive loyalty towards a party centre which had the power to allocate positions and direct careers. However, functionaries with a National Socialist entanglement did not have much to offer to the "governed 'masses'", except maybe the impression of being similar to a population which, after all, did also not consist of anti-fascist resistance fighters or victims of persecution.

Keywords: GDR, socialism, power elite, denazification, SED, party functionaries, secretaries, NSDAP, communist rule.

1. Communist Elitism

In their taxonomy of elite settings, which is meanwhile part of the core stock of modern elite theory, John Higley and Michael Burton count the elites of communist societies of the Soviet type among the class of ideologically united or "ideocratic elites" (cf. Higley / Burton 2006: 1-32). These regimes base the legitimation and objectives of their rule on a universal ideology which provides the binding framework of the order of all fields of society and particularly of the organisation of their power. The structure of rule is of levelled hierarchical and highly centralized nature, the top personell of the state party providing its core. As with societies of this type the differentiation of power is very strong

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but not based on the private ownership of means of production, communist societies are particularly important cases for the application of elite theory and significant fields of elite research (cf. Best 2002, 2003a). Thus, they are particularly significant because they make an analysis of the social structure of those power relations possible which are not based on private property. Elite theories thus contradict the construct of a society becoming de-hierarchized in the process of socialist development (cf. Best 2004, 2009). That is why representatives of Marxism/Leninism have condemned the concept of the elite as a “part of the reactionary wing of bourgeois ideology” and an “expression of the claim for power of the most reactionary part of monopolist bourgeoisie” (cf. Wörterbuch 1983: 156-157).

Of course the concept of the elite was deprecated in real existing socialism – still today we have to avoid it during our interviews with the GDR’s old leadership personell. For the thing as such, however, there are analogies and equivalents: *avantgarde*, cadre, leader, functionaries. Already Marx had given reasons for the necessity of leadership for any kind of “combined production”, pointing out to the “uniformity of the process as the result of one commanding will ... just as with the conductor of an orchestra” (cf. Marx 1964: 379). Lenin intensified this maxime by expressing “unopposed subordination under one uniform will” as it was demanded by any “machine-driven big industry”. Also, he did not see any “basic contradiction between Soviet (i. e. socialist) democracy and individuals exerting dictatorial power” (cf. Lenin 1989b: 92-95). This power, he stated, comes from the Bolshevik party representing the people, which for its exertion of power uses the bourgeois state as it now exists without bourgeoisie.

Here, the rigid structures of the rule of a socialist elite *sans la lettre* become obvious, for which reasons are given by functional and historic necessities, in a way which is definitely compatible to classical elite theories. Then Lenin’s theory of state and rule can be reconstructed as an elite theory *avant la lettre*. Structure and practice of the rule of a socialist elite are legitimated by the Communist Party’s role as an *avantgarde* and by the leadership and planning functions of society being basically open to “any qualified and participating worker” – that is by the system of rule being oriented towards the world-historic objectives of socialist development and a purposeful mode of recruiting cadre and leadership functionaries which is said to result in a leadership being superior to bourgeois society (cf. Lenin 1989a: 731-739). As thus the legitimacy of the rule of a socialist elite is essentially based on meeting the ideological criteria of communist ideocracies, in this case it is particularly appropriate to define the congruity of the criteria of the system of conviction and the practice of its realization.

2. Communism and National Socialism: Ideology and Reality

In the following, this shall be done concerning the power elites of the GDR and particularly while looking at their involvement in the system of rule of National Socialism. Here, it is about the legitimacy core of the SED's power structure, as from its beginnings to its end anti-fascism was the most important ideologem of its ideology of power. By way of anti-fascism the SED mobilized support for itself and for the state – we may remind to intellectuals such as Heinrich Mann or Victor Klemperer – integrated its system of rule – we may remind to NVA officer cadets being sworn in at the Buchenwald Memorial – and legitimated its determined closing off from the West – we may remind to the “Anti-Fascist Protective Wall”. The master narration of the fighting and suffering of communist resistance and the Red Army's heroic victory over “Hitler Fascism” was the canonic core of the GDR's founding myth and its state doctrine. New, socialist Germany was the epitome of the other, the anti-thesis to National Socialist Germany. The West German sub-state on the other hand, it was stated, was inevitably spoiled by the ideological, social-structural, political and most of all personal National Socialist past contaminating its post-war order. These were the main ideologems and the line of propaganda.

However, this was contrasted by the reality of life of a society which in 1945 had been deeply nazified both in East and West Germany, whose pre-history and biographies could not simply be set to zero and deleted. This was also true for the denazification process, agreed on at the Potsdam Conference and started by a joined decision of the Allied Control Council in January, 1946. The objective was the purification of German society, of culture, press, economy, jurisdiction and politics from all National Socialist influences. At the level of those being less guilty this was supposed to happen, among others, by clearing members of the former NSDAP and its organisations from the above mentioned fields, at least from leadership positions.

It is well known that denazification was handled in different ways in post-war Germany's occupation zones but that in the Soviet zone purification was considered particularly rigorous and consistent. Most of all the sustainable elimination of National Socialists from leadership positions in the GDR's state and society was considered one of the main achievements of the socialist German sub-state. This went as far as to former NSDAP members and candidates being banned from university studies. As a matter of course it could be expected that the SED itself, being the custodian and executor of the anti-fascist heritage and task, would stay clear of an influx of former National Socialists.

This expectation could be formally based on an essential agreement from October 30th, 1945, between those parties as being legal in the Soviet zone in those days not to accept any former members of the NSDAP. It is well known that this decision did not last long and that in 1948 by the NDPD even a block

party was formed which was expressively meant as a melting pot of former National Socialists, Wehrmacht officers and National Conservatives. Only after 1989 and the opening of the SED's party files, however, it became obvious that this function had already been taken over by the SED itself after May, 1946, that is immediately after its foundation. As a result, the share of former National Socialists being accepted by the SED was considerably higher than with all other block parties together. These statements, supported by the SED's archive heritage, are further supported by our outflux analyses of the GDR's Council of Ministers' "*Zentraler Kaderdatenspeicher*" ZKDS (Central Cadre Database, CCDB), where the party memberships after 1945 of about 15,000 former National Socialists are registered: about one fourth of them joined a party again after 1945, for two thirds of this sub-group the SED was the party they joined. Here, sequentially belonging to a party of power was the predominant pattern, and this was independent of the colour of this party (cf. Best / Salheiser 2006). To make the data more understandable, it may be added that the here analyzed basic totality of former NSDAP members refers to the fathers of those being recorded by the CCDB.

3. NSDAP and SED: Continuities at Membership and Leadership Level

The influx of former National Socialists into the SED left a clear trace with the statistics of its members. For example at the beginning of 1952, after the party cleansing of 1951, in the Saxonian division of the SED 6.7 % of its members had been NSDAP members before. With individual local organisations this share was even 30 % and more. On the whole, in 1952 about 100,000 former NSDAP members were members of the SED, which is about 8-10 % of the total number of members (without candidates). To this – as I will explain right after – a considerable share of crypto-National Socialists must be added who did not tell about their former NSDAP membership when joining the SED.

But even without taking clandestine party comrades into account, the strong presence of former National Socialists with the SED and the careful way of dealing with them meant a provocation for the veterans from the workers' parties and the communist opposition groups of the Weimar Republic, who during the party cleansings were accused of "Social Democratism" and "sectarianism", although many of them could be considered ideal anti-fascists. Here there was a clear contradiction between the ideologems of anti-fascism and the practice of the state party.

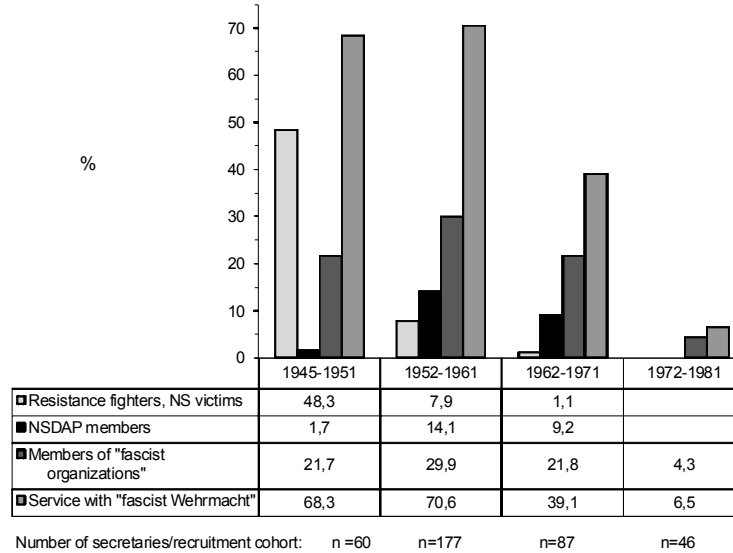
Whereas several publications have reported about the degree of simple membership of former National Socialists with the SED, previously there have been no appropriate insights regarding the presence of members of "fascist organisations" with the SED's leadership cadres. It could be expected that a militantly anti-fascist party would clearly close off from the NSDAP at least at

the level of its important function bearers. However, an analysis we carried out in Jena on the 441 First and Second SED Party Secretaries in the Thuringian districts of the GDR from 1952 to 1989, based on both SED party files and the NSDAP Member Files of the Berlin Document Center, produced an image which is clearly different from this expectation (cf. Best / Meenzen 2010, Best 2003b, Salheiser / Meenzen 2003).¹ This way we view at a category of functionaries which – to have it in Gaetano Mosca’s terminology – must be counted among the “second stratum of the ruling class” (cf. Mosca 1950) and which, being the secondary elite of the SED regime, occupied a key position with executing the party rule at local and regional level. As nomenclature superiors on the level of confirmation for nomenclature control, the CC of the SED – and that is the Party centre in Berlin – immediately contributed to their installment. For the depiction of the findings, to be able to grasp the change of recruitment patterns, we distinguished five “recruitment cohorts”. For the here relevant “Political Past before 1945” only the first four are of interest.

In this context, at first we will look at three cadre features which are essential in respect of the SED’s main recruitment ideologem: anti-fascist resistance and NS persecution, membership in “fascist organisations” and service with the “fascist Wehrmacht” (Fig. 1). Whereas among the secretaries appointed between 1945 and 1951 there had at least been 48 % resistance fighters and those having been persecuted in any other way by the National Socialist rule of violence, with the next recruitment cohort this share declined abruptly to 7.9 % or – if we add all those who had been before 1945 members of the KPD or other communist organisations – to 12.4 %. As early as with the then following cohort, however, the category of resistance fighters, victims of persecution and old communists died out, with only one last active anti-fascist among the newly appointed secretaries. On the other hand, after an already remarkably high initial figure with the founding cohort (21.7 %), from 1952 on to 1961 former members of National Socialist organisations were clearly more successful (29.9 %), and among those being newly appointed after 1962 they were the only secretaries who were experienced with political organising back to before 1945.

¹ On the BDC and the NSDAP files, cf. Heinz Fehlauer’s contribution to this volume.

Fig.1 First and Second SED Secretaries in the Thuringian Districts
(Selection, n=370)² Political Past before 1945
(More than one membership possible)



However, crucial for our population under analysis was the experience of having belonged to the Wehrmacht, with about 70 % of cadres having this experience until the beginning of the 1960s, between 1962 and 1971 it was still 39 %, after all. The overwhelming majority of Wehrmacht members had been serving as rank and file or NCOs. More than 50 % respectively of those party secretaries who were appointed until 1961 had been prisoners of war, two to one of them having spent their time in camps of the Western Allies – which is surprising because this biographic branch was considered a negative cadre feature.

Unexpectedly, here we encounter the predominant social figure among the SED's regional top cadres in the initial phase of the GDR not (anymore) in the form of the resistance fighter and anti-fascist martyr but of the young worker, decorated by having been the rank and file of the "fascist Wehrmacht" or by having worn the uniform of the Hitler Youth (HJ) leader. To a considerable degree, the avantgarde of anti-fascist Germany was recruited from the rear-guard of the NS regime. Naturally, we are not able to conclude from a collective-biographic archaeology of cadre files on the calculations and circumstances resulting in this shift away from the anti-fascist founding myth among

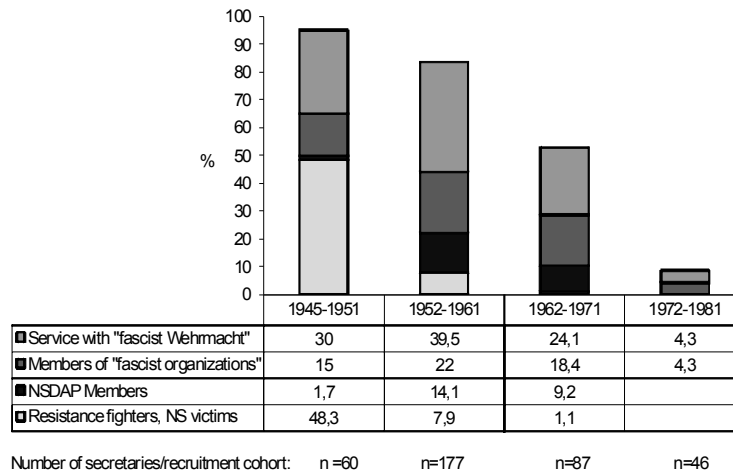
² Only selected recruitment cohorts, n=370 of a total of 441 secretaries.

those secretaries as being newly installed from 1952 on. However, that this was a “consciously started changed” in order to secure the “Stalinization process in the GDR by way of installing new members of the leadership” is suggested by the relevant research (in particular, cf. Malycha 2002). In the course of this, those HJ leaders got into leadership positions who had benefited from the Allies’ “youth amnesty” and the then following law making of the Soviet zone’s federal state parliaments in spring, 1947, according to which all young people who had been born after January 1st, 1919, and had been members of the NSDAP or of one of its organisations were supposed to be treated as citizens of equal right in public life, as far as they had not committed any crime nor had occupied higher positions in the power structure of Nazi Germany.

About two thirds of the new District Secretaries appointed in the Thuringian districts from 1952 on belonged to this now favoured “HJ generation”. It was a “favoured potential not only for gaining new members but also for the training of new function bearers within the party”, and since the beginning of the 1950s – “due to increased party cleansings most of all affecting the old regular functionaries” – they were provided with privileged opportunities to rise. Additionally there was the increased demand for cadres as a result of the “building of socialism”, proclaimed in 1952, and the restructuring of the GDR’s territorial districts which resulted in the dissolving of the federal states and the establishment of the districts. Then the party elections of May and June, 1952, meant a break, in the course of which there happened a change of generation in favour of those cadres who had joined a workers’ party after 1945.

As concerning “fascist organisations”, the previous discussion did not cover one category: the NSDAP (Figs. 1 and 2). Indeed, concerning our population of 441 First and Second Secretaries in Thuringia, the party files at first included only one hint at NSDAP membership. A subsequent comparison of our cadre population with the membership index of the NSDAP produced, however, a hit list of a total of 37 people, 35 of whom could be safely identified as former NSDAP members after a chronological and spatial verification. Fourteen of them gave April 20th, 1944, as their date of joining when, as it is well known, there happened a collective admission whose effectivity and voluntary nature is debated. Following the predominant opinion, we considered these admissions to be valid. This interpretation is supported by the fact that among the NSDAP members with this date of admission there was a particularly high share of HJ leaders and Wehrmacht volunteers.

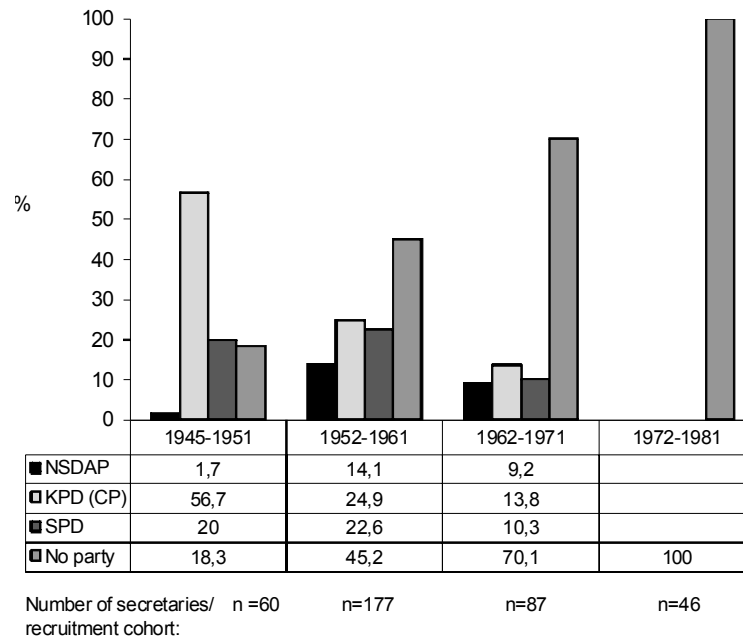
Fig.2 First and Second SED Secretaries in the Thuringian Districts
(Selection, n=370)³: Political Past before 1945
(Exclusive depiction of memberships – NSDAP = highest priority)



Former NSDAP members are only found with the first three recruitment cohorts, with shares of 2 %, 14 % and 9 %. Again, the recruitment cohort from 1952-1961 is conspicuous, which with 177 people is numerically the biggest and from which the vast majority of the secretaries of the following decades was recruited. With this cohort, for one resistance fighter and victim of NS persecution there were two NSDAP members. More than one third (36 %) of secretaries appointed between 1952 and 1961 had been members of the NSDAP or its branch organisations. The share of former NSDAP members in this cohort came close to that of former KPD and SPD members, with the next cohort there was parity (Fig. 3). Put bluntly, we may say that belatedly the NSDAP became the third partner of the party unification of 1946 and was given access to top positions, most of all by way of young new members of the SED who had been born after 1919.

³ Only selected recruitment cohorts, n=370 of a total of 441 secretaries.

Fig.3 First and Second SED Secretaries in the Thuringian Districts (Selection, n=370)⁴: Party Membership before Joining the SED



4. Loyalty through Impurity?

Even if currently we do not exactly know the actual share of clandestine NSDAP members among regional top functionaries of the SED, already from those data as documented by the party files we may state that in the course of the transition from the first cohort, which was still characterized by resistance and persecution, to the second one, characterized by membership in fascist organisations and the Wehrmacht, there was a politically intended change of the practice of recruitment.

We interpret this change as the result of a shift of emphasis of cadre policy away from the selection criterion of legitimacy – incarnated by the old communist and social democrat who had proven his worth during the period of anti-fascist resistance – to (submissive) loyalty, personified by the young functionary who had achieved his position in the course of a fast career without any spectacular achievements. Not coincidentally the biographic memory of this

⁴ Only selected recruitment cohorts, n=370 of a total of 441 secretaries. SPD: only Social Democrats who had not been KPD members in the meantime.

generation of functionaries connects the topos of “thankfulness” towards a party supporting the young people without any prejudice to having been appointed District Secretary.

The fact that their past during the NS regime was overwhelmingly characterized by collaboration and fellow travelling may be supposed to have even supported a kind of submissive loyalty towards a party centre which had the power to allocate positions and direct careers. They were party creatures. However, such functionaries did not have much to offer to the “governed ‘masses’”, except maybe the impression of being similar to a population which, after all, did also not consist of anti-fascist resistance fighters or victims of persecution. But even if this was the case, the cadre policy of the 1950s had hardly any legitimating potential, for a difference in respect of providing privileges of power and rule cannot be based on the equality of privileged and unprivileged. Obviously, what was crucial here was the immediate instrumental aspect of securing SED rule by help of District Secretaries whose unrestricted loyalty was secured by a way of cleaning their past in the course of which the party was forgiving but not forgetting.

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